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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a system of classifying client responses in counseling interviews. The author begins his classification at Stage 1, where the client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy are so low he cannot admit he needs help, and delineates each stage of the client's reaction through Stage 12, the final step, where the client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased so that he can now accept the fact that while he will still have to face problems as they arise, he now feels adequate to cope with them. Each stage level is described, complete with characteristic perceptions and feelings with psychological explanations, a description of definitive overt behavior, and illustrative client comments.
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A Sequence of Developmental Stages Designed to Classify Client Responses in Counseling Interviews in a Way which Will Reveal Significant Changes in Client Feelings and Perceptions as he Seeks and Gains Independence and Self-Autonomy in Dealing with his Adjustment Difficulties.

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Arno H. Luker has been teaching and practicing counseling at the University of Northern Colorado (formerly Colorado State College) for more than twenty years, and in these two decades has had in class about twenty thousand students who are now actively practicing counseling in the United States and several foreign countries. It is my contention that he is the foremost psychologist in the United States today in the influence of phenomenal, gestaltist, and humanistic thinking. This is not because of his writing, nor wide consulting at various other institutions, nor the sale of books; but because of his teaching of several important documents written and published only to his numerous students. These documents will long endure because practicing counselors find them extremely useful.

This particular set of steps needs to be more widely disseminated and made available so students who have never been fortunate enough to study under this clear thinking humanistic psychologist. This may enable the counselor to evaluate an individual who comes for counseling help. This is of inestimable value to the busy counselor in making some important decisions as to the student's present state as well as progress in the counseling process. On the following pages, Luker's work is presented exactly as they were presented to classes in counseling.

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A SEQUENCE OF DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES DESIGNED TO CLASSIFY CLIENT RESPONSES
IN COUNSELING INTERVIEWS IN A WAY WHICH WILL REVEAL SIGNIFICANT CHANGES
IN CLIENT FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS AS HE SEEKS AND GAINS INDEPENDENCE
AND SELF-AUTONOMY IN DEALING WITH HIS ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES

By Arno H. Luker

STAGE 1. The client's self evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy are so low and his feelings of insecurity so intense that he cannot admit he has adjustment difficulties, is emotionally disturbed, or needs help.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client's perceptions and feelings about himself, about other people, and about the situations he meets and about his ability to make effective adjustments are such that he cannot admit to the counselor, or perhaps even to himself, the fact that he feels distressed and insecure and needs help. On the surface he seems impelled to reject perceptions and feelings he accepts at deeper levels of awareness. On the surface he must believe, proclaim, and conceive himself as adequate in order to conceal and deny what, at deeper levels, he perceives and feels himself to be, namely, insecure, inadequate, misunderstood, rejected, unwanted, and alone. At deeper levels, he perceives the situations confronting him as critically threatening to himself, other persons as hostile, unappreciative or lacking in understanding, and himself as incapable of finding or using effective means of resolving or coping with his difficulties. These feelings are of such an intensity that even to admit he feels insecure, needs help, or has emotional difficulties constitutes a threat to the self too

great or too catastrophic to be countenanced. He seeks, therefore, to protect himself from further injury or, in some cases, from complete breakdown by denying such perceptions and feelings.

Such feelings and protective actions are often shown by the unwilling client who has been referred for counseling or one who comes voluntarily but for reasons alleged to be other than that of seeking help. In the latter case, he uses the first portion of the interview to observe and test the counselor's reactions to see if the counseling situation is sufficiently permissive and free of threat to permit him to make the commitments and admissions he deems necessary to benefit from counseling.

In many instances, such as those where he voluntarily seeks counseling, the client has passed this initial stage before coming for his first interview. He has found the discomfort and threat of continuing to live with his unresolved difficulties more intolerable than the misgivings and pain involved in admitting he has problems and needs help. Stated positively, he perceives that, in the long run, the chances for self-enhancement and self-actualization will be increased by admitting he has difficulties and desires help. Such motivating forces may even be essential before he will willingly seek counseling assistance or use it effectively once provisions for counseling have been made. Under forced referral, he may refuse to make effective use of the time which has been set aside for him.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client denies he needs help or has adjustment difficulties.

Illustrative Client Comments

"Well, here I am, but I don't understand why. Mother said you would help me with my problems, but I don't have any problems."

"My husband wanted me to come to see you, but I don't know why I should. I don't have any problems. The whole idea is ridiculous."

"I didn't come to talk about myself. I don't have any problems to amount to anything, but I was wondering whether you could perhaps give me some suggestions about my boyfriend."

STAGE 2. The client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased sufficiently for him to admit he has difficulties and needs help, but are still too low to permit him to accept full or partial responsibility or blame.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client has gained sufficient self-autonomy and feelings of security in himself and in the counseling situation to admit he has problems, but is still unable to accept even partial responsibility for his difficulties. Since he feels too insecure and threatened to see relationships between his troubles and his own feelings, attitudes, and concepts, he must perceive the blame or responsibility to reside in someone or something else. He can more easily admit his difficulties if he can perceive the cause to lie outside himself and beyond his control and if he can perceive himself the victim of overpowering circumstances. Thus, having problems need not appear to be a sign of weakness or inadequacy. Moreover, his ability to make these admissions provides at least some self-enhancement. By admitting he has troubles, he has taken the first step in making perceptual changes needed to cope with his difficulties and to develop increased self-autonomy.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client admits he has adjustment difficulties but denies responsibility for them.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I'll admit I have more than my share of problems, but it's not my fault."

"Everyone has problems, but most won't admit it. I'm not afraid to admit I have problems. No thanks to Dad for that. All he and Mom ever did is pick on me. They are the ones who got me into this mess."

"Of course I have problems. Who, in my situation, wouldn't have?"

STAGE 3. The client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased sufficiently for him to accept full or at least partial responsibility for his feelings and difficulties, but not enough for him to assume responsibility for seeking solutions or to perceive that effective courses of action might require changes in himself and his behavior.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client has gained enough self-confidence in this permissive, understanding, and non-judgmental atmosphere to be able to admit his own reactions are at least partially responsible for his problems or at least for the fact that they are as severe as acute as they appear to be. He has taken another step in dealing with his troubles for, until he can admit responsibility for his difficulties, he will tend to expend his energy in hostile thoughts, actions, and feelings directed toward those upon whom he has affixed blame, and he cannot positively and creatively seek and plan changes needed in finding effective solutions. Hence, by accepting responsibility, he has increased his level of independence and self-autonomy. He has not yet discovered that such an admission implies that to deal with these difficulties he will need to change himself and his actions, so his feelings about himself and about counseling are more positive than they were during Stage 2.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client admits he is wholly or in part responsible for his difficulties.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I guess I have been blaming them for the mess I am in, but it's really my own fault."

"I guess I may as well be honest with myself. It was my fault. I really cause most of my own trouble."

"Who am I kidding? They are not really the cause of my troubles. Everyone makes his own."

STAGE 4. The client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased sufficiently for him to realize that solutions to his difficulties must involve changes in himself and his behavior, but not enough to accept responsibility for deciding what changes to make or how to make them.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

At this stage, the client has related his difficulties to himself and, for the first time, seems to realize that, to be effective, changes must involve himself and his behavior. Yet he feels incapable of determining what changes to make and how to make them. This creates a dilemma. He would like to gain the enhancement of accepting a need for self-change, but he wishes to avoid feelings of inadequacy which accompany an admission that he has no effective solutions and may not be able to find any. He resolves his difficulty by accepting the necessity of change but rejecting responsibility for finding what this change should be. If the latter is not his responsibility, he need not feel so inadequate. So he tries to shift this task to the counselor. Failing to do so, he may solicit ready-made solutions from others between counseling sessions, preferably remedies which do not necessitate the pain of self-

examination and change. Tensions which have been gradually diminishing from Stages 1 through 3 now increase in intensity as a discrepancy develops between the level of autonomy accepted and the perceived capacity to adjust at this level. Nevertheless he does feel enhanced by his ability to accept the need for self-change but threatened and inadequate in the face of his inability to work out effective solutions. To relieve these feelings, he may adopt feelings and reactions typical of earlier stages. Thus, increases in tension, efforts to pass responsibility to the counselor, and regressive tendencies may be anticipated during Stage 4.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client admits verbally that he must change but doesn't know how. He indicates that he has done his part and the rest is up to the counselor.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I've told you all I know. I know I need to change. But how? I don't know."

"That's about as far as I can go. Now if you will tell me what to do, I'll be glad to do it. I'll do anything you say."

"I feel terrible. I know I shouldn't go on as I have been, but I don't know what else to do."

STAGE 5. The client's self-evaluation and his levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased to such an extent that he can now accept responsibility for finding and planning changes, but he still feels inadequate in attempting to do so.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client continues to grow in self-confidence and self-autonomy as he accepts responsibility for finding solutions to his adjustment difficulties. His tensions and feelings of inadequacy, however, tend to increase or to

persist when he experiences difficulty in finding solutions. Again, there is a discrepancy between the responsibility he has accepted and his perceived ability to cope with these responsibilities. He wishes for solutions but knows he must find them himself. He feels helpless and inadequate.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client accepts his responsibility for resolving his difficulties but expresses doubt concerning his ability to do so.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I know I have to change to get rid of these feelings of inadequacy. No one can do it for me. But I don't know how to go about it."

"I know I must solve my own problems, but with all these complications, I don't see how I can do it."

"I know you can't do this for me. No one can. I have to find out how to change myself. But how? I feel so helpless."

STAGE 6. The client's self-evaluation and level of independence and self-autonomy increase and tensions drop as he works out possible solutions to his difficulties and tentatively resolves to put them into effect, but he hasn't yet grasped the full impact such changes may have on himself and on others.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client's self-evaluations and his perceptions about other have changed enough to permit him to work out possible solutions to his difficulties. The discrepancies between the responsibilities he has accepted and his perceived ability to meet them have virtually disappeared. This fact, the success of his efforts, and his growing independence and self-autonomy tend to enhance his self-concept, his feelings of confidence in himself, and his feelings of worth and well-being. He feels good about himself, about the world and about

the counseling situation. For the first time in many days or years he sees and can express a glimmer of hope and confidence that his problems can perhaps be solved or at least mitigated.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client indicates he has found a possible solution to his difficulties and expresses feelings of hope, joy, optimism and well-being.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I thought I didn't need people. All I needed was my work. But I was fooling myself all along. I want to be accepted by people. Now that I know this, my big job is to make contact, to know them and like them, and to feel that they are important."

"I did it! I found a solution! I think I'll give it a try. I feel much better."

"I think I have found my trouble and what to do about it. Now perhaps I can do something about it."

STAGE 7. The client's self-evaluation and his levels of independence and self-autonomy are such that he perceives the necessity of trying out his plans of action but finds himself unable to do so but does not know why.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client feels the need to implement his plans but discovers he is unable to do so. He accepts intellectually the need for direct action and change but cannot emotionally and motivationally bring himself to take action. His apparent inability to carry out his plans tends to undermine his new-found confidence. Again there is a discrepancy between the responsibility he has assumed and his perceived ability to cope with it. His feelings of inadequacy, his tensions, and his tendencies toward regression increase. He may express a

lack of confidence in and dissatisfaction with himself, his solutions, and perhaps the counseling process. He may reject his solutions without having tried them, attempt to obtain suggestions from the counselor, revert to behavior typical of earlier stages, or concern himself with his inability to take action.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client expresses the need to try his solutions and his inability to take action and to understand why he cannot do so. He expresses feelings of discouragement and dejection.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I feel discouraged. I'm not making any progress. I know what I should do, and I have good intentions, but I can't seem to do anything about it."

"I know intellectually this is what I must do to straighten out my feelings, but emotionally I am helpless to do anything about it."

"It's awfully hard to change myself. I know I need to but when the time comes to do something, I'm just helpless. I sometimes wonder if I really want to, yet I know I do."

STAGE 8. The client's self-evaluation and his levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased so that he can face and explore the consequences of change and the reasons for his inability to take action.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client discovers that to change is difficult because it involves giving up perceptions and patterns of behavior which, though painful, also possess considerable enhancement value. He fears that change may rob him of the protection his former familiar modes of behavior afforded him. He perceives, too, that though potentially enhancing, change requires modes of feeling and acting which are essentially new, unfamiliar, and potentially unjurious

to feelings of adequacy. Change, too, involves the risk of failure and of destroying the last glimmer of hope of eventually resolving his adjustment difficulties. It is perhaps better to continue familiar modes of behavior, though painful, and to live with hope than to gamble on the new and perhaps lose hope completely. He feels too inadequate to risk the self devaluation which would accompany failure.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client indicates that he can't take action because the advantages his present mode of behavior offers still tend to outweigh those of change.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I guess I don't really want to change. Having problems makes me more sensitive and understanding of others. I don't want to give that up."

"I guess I can't go through with my plans because I'm afraid. I've never tried this before and wouldn't know how to act."

"I suppose I can't go through with my plans because I think 'What if it doesn't work? What if I fail?' I couldn't stand that. Just the thought of it turns me inside out. I'm trembling all over."

STAGE 9. The client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy increase so he perceives one of the adjustment alternative which he has been considering as preferable to the others, resolves to try it, and seeks means of implementing these plans without causing misunderstanding or injury.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client has made sufficient changes in perceptions so that he deems one adjustment alternative preferable to others and decides to act accordingly. The chosen course of action may consist of a new adjustment, modifications of the old, or a continuation of the old but with new attitudes toward it which

tend to eliminate or reduce the feelings of inadequacy and tension he previously experienced. He now feels able to take action on his decisions. He may, however, be concerned about how he can do so without causing misunderstanding or hurting himself or others. Gradually he resolves this difficulty. With these perceptual changes, the discrepancy between his choices and his ability to act on them tends to reduce or disappear. His self-confidence, satisfaction with himself, his solutions, the counseling process, and the world in general tend to increase. He resolves to take action irrespective of the hazards involved.

Definitive Overt Verbal Behavior

The client expresses preferences for one adjustment alternative, reasons for his choice, confidence in his ability to take action, and his resolution to do so. He considers means of putting his plans into effect. He expresses confidence, optimism, and satisfaction with himself and the world in general.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I see now I have been using this as a crutch. I don't have to have problems to be sensitive and understanding so I really have nothing to lose by changing. Now that I know I can take action, I feel better already."

"Of course, my plan might not work, but it is worth the chance. I'm positive of that. I'm going to try it. This is like lifting a weight off my shoulders."

"Now that I can see I won't have to be a completely different person, I know I can do something about myself. I know I can succeed. This is a good feeling."

"I know what I have to do to change and I am going to do it. Now, how can I make the break so there won't be misunderstanding and so one one will be hurt?"

STAGE 10. Having successfully implemented his plans, the client's self-evaluation and his levels of independence and self-autonomy increase so that he experiences feelings of well being and optimism and perceives all his difficulties as resolved.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client has successfully tested his solution and perceives his problems virtually solved. He feels self-confident, optimistic, and happy with himself and others and with his new-found independence and self-autonomy. The contrast with his previous feelings is so great that he overgeneralizes to the extent that he assumes his problems are over and he will never again experience failure and feelings of inadequacy. If life will introduce no new difficulties, he can feel secure in his ability to adjust successfully. The world appears friendly and life seems really worth living.

Definitive Overt Behavior

The client expresses positive feelings of happiness and optimism. He indicates that he has tried his solutions with success and that all of his problems are over.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I did what I said I would and it worked--anyway I think it did. I feel like a different person and the whole world looks rosy. All my problems are over."

"It feels good to succeed and to know you can do it yourself. I'll need some practice being this new person, but I know my difficulties are over now."

STAGE 11. The client's self-evaluation and levels of independence and self-autonomy lead him to discover and accept the fact that even the changes he has made will not eradicate all of his difficulties, and he experiences a recurrence of feelings of doubt and inadequacy.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client has had an experience which convinces him that the changes he has made are not a panacea for all of his emotional ills and that he still has or will have difficulties. He feels disappointed, discouraged, tense, and somewhat pessimistic. He feels less adequate than he did on Stage 10 and less confident in himself and his solutions. He may even exhibit mild regressive tendencies. Though temporarily painful, these perceptions form the basis for correcting the overgeneralizations he made during Stage 10 and for adopting a more realistic concept concerning himself and his ability to meet difficulties as they arise. He had hoped that somehow the changes he had made and the success he had experienced meant there would be no more problems to face. Thus, he could feel secure in the belief that he could cope with his environment. Meeting new problems led to disillusionment. He has not yet perceived himself as capable of meeting new problems as they arise, so there is some discrepancy between the responsibility he has accepted and his perceived ability to act.

Definitive Overc Verbal Behavior

The client expresses disappointment when he discovers all of his difficulties are not over. He expresses feelings of inadequacy, tension, and discouragement.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I had a setback yesterday. He was sarcastic and made me feel small, and I started to have some of my old feelings again. I wonder if my changes were really worthwhile if I am really the new person I thought I was. I feel terrible again."

"I had an experience that shook me when I realized that even with my new self I will have to face problems. I started to feel afraid and inferior again."

STAGE 12. The client's self-evaluation and his levels of independence and self-autonomy have increased so that he can now accept the fact that he will still have to face problems as they arise but he now feels adequate enough to cope with them.

Characteristic Perceptions and Feelings with Psychological Explanations

The client discovers that the feelings of inadequacy experienced during Stage 11 are not nearly as severe as those he used to have. His self-confidence increases so that he can now accept the fact that he will always meet obstacles, but he now feels he has developed the self-concept and tools needed to work out effective solutions. This corrects the overgeneralizations developed in Stage 10. He, therefore, feels more realistically optimistic and confident in himself and in his ability to face any adjustment difficulties which might arise. He feels he no longer needs help and should terminate the interviews. Yet, he feels the need of assurance that he can return for additional sessions should the need arise.

Definitive Overt Behavior

The client indicates he knows that he, like other people, must continue to face new difficulties as they arise, but he feels able to do so. He expresses feelings of self-confidence, of gratitude, and of a desire to terminate the interviews.

Illustrative Client Comments

"I should have known one can't get rid of all problems, but now I feel I can handle them when they come up."

"Well, I think I am about there. I realize that I will always have to face the possibility of difficulties, but now I feel I can handle them. I won't need any more appointments, but in case I do, could I call?"